

CONFLICT RESOLUTION



HOW THE GOSPEL OVERCOMES THE
PROBLEM, PROVIDES THE POWER AND
DIRECTS THE PRACTICE

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION

LESSON 1	The Problem (James 4:1-12)	1
LESSON 2	The Power (Colossians 3:12-17)	11
LESSON 3	The Practice (Ephesians 4:25-32)	21

SUGGESTED READING LIST: CONFLICT RESOLUTION

- ☐ *Forgiveness*, Tim Keller
 - ☐ *War of Words*, Paul David Tripp
 - ☐ *Loving the Way Jesus Loves*, Phil Ryken
 - ☐ *Good and Angry*, David Powlison
 - ☐ *Relationships*, Timothy Lane and Paul David Tripp
 - ☐ *Practicing Affirmation*, Sam Crabtree
 - ☐ *A Small Book about a Big Problem*, Ed Welch
 - ☐ *Taming the Tongue*, Jeff Robinson Sr.
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CONFLICT RESOLUTION

LESSON ONE THE PROBLEM

HEARING THE WORD

For these three lessons, we will spend time considering how to resolve conflict biblically when it arises, as it inevitably does. While many of our illustrations or examples will focus on the marriage relationship, the principles we'll discuss have much wider application, such as with colleagues, friends, neighbors, extended family, and even the person who blows up at you in traffic.

Why do we experience so much conflict with those around us? Relentless interpersonal squabbles occupy so much of our time and energy. In light of the gospel, can we navigate our disagreements biblically and lovingly? To do so, we'll first need to examine the root problem, our focus this week. We'll then explore how the gospel empowers forbearing love next week, and conclude in the third week with a consideration of how to put gospel principles into practice during actual conflict. As we get started, spend some time meditating on this week's passage, in which James directly addresses our root problem.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? ⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

*"God opposes the proud
but shows favor to the humble."*

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

¹¹ Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. ¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

JAMES 4:1-12

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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According to James, what causes conflict between people? Somewhat counterintuitively, what does he suggest is the ultimate remedy to interpersonal conflict?

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“What causes fights and quarrels among you?” That’s the question we’re seeking to answer. Without Scripture to guide us, we would probably point to external factors. Conflict happens as a result of other people (“I’m not the cause of conflict; *they* are!”) or difficult circumstances (“I didn’t respond well because I didn’t get enough sleep last night”). James, however, won’t let us off the hook that easily. He diagnoses the root problem with clinical accuracy, even if we don’t like the diagnosis. In so doing, he also points us in a counterintuitive direction as we seek a remedy to our problem. As we unpack this powerful passage, we’ll examine the condition, culture, and command as James lays it out.

CONDITION (4:1-3)

James’ take on humanity is quite bleak, but also quite accurate. We experience fights and quarrels—even within the church, based on the context of this letter!—because of our inner desires. There is a battle raging within us between good and evil desires. That means we need to sort through our desires, and not simply assume they are all good.

There is something we seek—desire, covet—and if we don’t get it, we turn violent. This might include literal violence, sadly, but could also include the figurative, as when we do violence to a person’s reputation through slander. So what is it we seek so strongly that we would do violence to get it? In a word, *fullness*—meaning, significance, identity. Of course, God offers us fullness, meaning, significance, and identity in Christ, but what happens when we live without reference to God (as we often do: see verse 2b)? In that case, we need to find fullness for ourselves, create our own identity. This explains why these desires can turn truly violent: what is at stake is not just a promotion, for example, but one’s very sense of self.

Not surprisingly, then, seeking self-fulfillment corrodes human relationships, because it elevates an individual’s desires above the social web. A husband might work long hours vying for that promotion despite the objections of his wife. Why would he risk his marriage and create this conflict with his spouse? He sees the promotion as validating himself, proving his worth and significance, and so he’s willing to do figurative violence to his marriage in order to get it.

In James' context, however, we're not dealing with marriage but the church community. It seems that some church members are seeking wisdom that will set them apart (see 3:13-18). They want a seat at the table with the other power-brokers, and the respect and admiration that comes with it, and are willing to resort to machinations to get it. But notice that even when they turn to prayer in their pursuit, their selfishness taints their requests (verse 3). We might summarize the prayer as, "Give me wisdom *so that I get what I want.*" What God gives them they "spend freely" on their own pleasures, rather than using his gifts for the good of the community as a whole. This is selfish prayer, of which we're all too often guilty, not seeking his glory or kingdom, but our own self-actualization—our own vision of "fullness." The famed 19th-century scholar Fenton Hort aptly notes, "God bestows not gifts only, but the enjoyment of them: but the enjoyment which contributes to nothing beyond itself is not what He gives in answer to prayer; and petitions to Him which have no better end in view are not prayers."¹

I have called this our *condition* because it transcends culture. This is human nature since the time of the Fall. Our desire for autonomy, for seeking fullness apart from God, is the root cause of all sin, including sins of interpersonal conflict. We see this quite clearly in Eden—and interestingly, it also has to do with the sinful, God-denying pursuit of wisdom:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

GENESIS 3:6

I likely don't need to convince you that this is part of your nature. We see the evidence everywhere—and in every relational conflict. But it gets worse, because it is not just our condition (human nature) but our culture that actively encourages it.

CULTURE (4:4-6)

The world is not neutral. It promotes rebellion against God in culturally-specific ways. It is important to note at the outset of this section that James' readers, like us in the church today, do not overtly reject God and choose the world; nevertheless, their conduct shows they have in some ways at least. Already in James, we have seen believers imitate the world by discriminating against the poor (2:1-13), speaking negatively of others (3:1-12), displaying envy and ungodly ambition (3:13-18), and getting in fights and quarrels (4:1-3). They have imbibed the spirit of the age, which encourages a godless selfishness.

Have things changed? Certainly not; indeed, if anything, they've gotten worse. For our culture now actively encourages selfishness, and even exalts it as a positive virtue. Living in a highly individualistic age, as we do, we have elevated "self" to the highest pedestal. Our culture's mantra is that we must discover and live out our most authentic selves. In such a world, choice is the primary value, and intolerance the final "sin." Follow your dreams. Do what makes you happy. You do you.

(By the way, it shouldn't take much to see how this leads to unceasing conflict. Anyone who prevents us from living out our dreams—whether that be as mundane as getting the parking place nearer the entrance or as grandiose as choosing a marriage partner—is an enemy of our happiness.)

¹ As quoted in Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000): 185.

Hopefully as Christians we can see the error in our culture's prevailing mindset, but we'd be fools to think culture hasn't seeped in at all. Because secular humanism is the air we breathe, we can see it throughout the church. For example, when we experience conflict in the church (as James' audience did), what do we do now? We simply pack up and move to a different church that will offer us what we want: the music we prefer, preaching we like (that doesn't offend us), and nicer people. We're highly individualistic, even as Christians.

But, as James reminds us, friendship with the world is *enmity* with God. Individualism seeks to usurp God's role as King. It is the original sin rebranded for the 21st century. This is why James calls us adulteresses. Marriage is meant to be a parable of our covenant relationship with God. But when we love the world, we are unfaithful to God, chasing instead the idols of self-fulfillment and self-actualization. Thank God, then, that there is grace. Our God jealously longs for us. We may think negatively of jealousy, but it can be proper and righteous in the right context. We are his, and he is jealous for us the way a spouse should be jealous for the marriage. And so he woos us back to himself, away from culture, by lavishing grace on us—if we humble ourselves.

This is profoundly counterintuitive, at least from a human perspective, but true nevertheless. When we experience interpersonal conflict, the first step is not to get right with others—those with whom we're in conflict—but to get right with God. After all, conflict stems from our sin nature: sinful desires giving birth to sinful behavior. We need to address sin at its root, and not just the flower of interpersonal conflict.

COMMAND (4:7-12)

These are some of the strongest words in the New Testament, but we must remember that God would not have included them in his Word to us unless we needed to hear it. What is his command to us, in light of our relentless desire for autonomy? In a word, *submit*. We must choose not self-will but self-denial. At its core, submission is simply acknowledging who you are in relation to God. We are not our own, but belong to God who created us. This is what it means to fear God—and to reject the sin of Eden. Of course, this general submission manifests in concrete acts of specific submission, such as praying for God's will to be done in our lives, and seeking to know what would please God in any given situation (Ephesians 5:10).

James calls us to turn from our selfish tendencies (listening to the serpent in the garden) and instead draw near to God—and accompanies the call with such sweet promise: when we draw near to God, he draws near to us. Of course, this assumes that we approach humbly (in Christ, whose blood cleanses us to enter his presence) and with repentance and contrition. This only makes sense. We can't actively love the world and at the same time pretend to draw near to God. That would be like a man bringing his mistress home to meet his wife. And yet, if we're honest, that's often what we do. We are, as James points out, double-minded in all we do. We have divided desires: we want God, but also want self-will. Thus, we must learn to pray with the psalmist, "give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name" (86:11).

This takes comprehensive repentance. We must wash our hands, which addresses the outward behavior, and purify our hearts, which addresses the inward desire. We grieve, mourn, wail, and change our laughter into mourning because we take our sinful self-will seriously. When we do that, he lifts us up in Christ: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

As if to remind us of where we started, James takes us back to interpersonal conflict in the last few verses. In light of all this, how could we possibly slander another person or judge another's sin instead of our own (verse 11-12)? Here James has pointed us in the direction of how we should respond when conflict happens, which we'll discuss at greater length in the next two lessons. Suffice to say for now, we do not look outward when we're quarreling with someone

else, but inward instead. We don't have time to judge someone else harshly, slandering them in our speech, because we are instead focused on exposing our own selfish desires, repenting of our friendship with the world, and drawing near to God in humble contrition. Our primary conflict is with the sin within us, not the person across from us. We seek first to reconcile with God, and then pursue gospel-shaped reconciliation with others.

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Psalm 86:5-13
- ☐ 1 Corinthians 1:10-17
- ☐ 1 Corinthians 3:1-4
- ☐ Proverbs 18:1

DOING THE WORD

If our passage for this lesson accurately diagnoses the problem (as it surely does), then we must take great care to apply it, working through its implications for our lives. Take some time to answer the questions below prayerfully.

Consider a recent, memorable conflict with your spouse or some other significant person. As you think through the quarrel, what selfish desire in you caused the conflict? That is, what sort of “fullness” were you seeking apart from God? (We can assume the other person also had selfish desires that exacerbated the conflict, but that’s not your business. Your business is to discern and deal with *your* sin!)

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Why is it important that we get right with God before we seek to reconcile with the other person?

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When conflict arises in the church, including with church leadership, how should you respond? How does this differ from what often happens today?

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How did your parents handle conflict? As you consider how you handle conflict, where do you see yourself falling into similar patterns (for good or bad)?

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION

LESSON TWO THE POWER

HEARING THE WORD

Resolving conflict biblically takes enormous spiritual strength. We must willfully turn from our innate selfishness, pride and anger, and toward humility, love and gentleness. We must choose to forgive when others wrong us, to forbear when change is slow in coming, and confess and repent, seeking forgiveness, when we have wronged others. None of this comes naturally to our flesh; we are far more apt to dig in our heels or lash out. Where will we find the power to overcome the flesh and choose Christ-likeness?

That is the focus of this lesson. In the last lesson we considered the root problem when it comes to our interpersonal conflict: because we have selfish desires, we quarrel with those who keep us from getting what we want, rather than seeking true satisfaction in Christ. This time we'll look at how the gospel empowers us to resolve conflict in a Christ-like manner, drawing from Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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How does Paul describe Christians in this passage? What does that suggest about how the gospel empowers us to resolve conflict biblically?

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In encouraging his readers to forgive and love those who have wronged them, Paul points first to the inward reality of who we are if we are in Christ, before turning to how our outward behavior should reflect that inner reality. Finally, he suggests several specific responses—habits to cultivate—that will ensure we continue living out our inward reality. Let's trace his argument as we go.

INWARD REALITY (3:12a)

At the end of his opening sentence, Paul will exhort us to live like Christ—clothing ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience—an exceedingly high standard. Before the exhortation, however, he reminds his readers of who they are in Christ. He describes Christ's followers with three words, each jam-packed with gospel power.

First, we are *chosen*. Before the creation of the world, God chose us, in love predestining us to be adopted as his very children (Ephesians 1:4-5). Because our salvation depends on *his* sovereign choice, and not our feeble efforts or fickle will, we can know with certainty that we are his. How comforting this is on days when we fall far short of the standard of Christ! As Paul reminds us in another passage, "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" (Romans 8:33). Satan's accusations have no power because we know God has chosen us, and his will is decisive.

Second, we are *holy*. God chose us specifically to be holy and blameless in his sight (Ephesians 1:4, again!). We may be tempted to read this as describing our behavior, but that's not what it means—at least not yet. John Piper helpfully clarifies:

This is first a position and a destiny before it is a pattern of behavior. That is why he is telling us the kind of behavior to “put on.” He knows we are not there yet, practically. He is calling us to *become* holy in life because we *are* holy in Christ. Dress to fit who you are. Wear holiness.¹

Third, we are dearly *loved*. The almighty God of the universe, King of kings and Lord of lords, sets his affection on you, if you belong to him by faith in Christ. Of the magnitude and duration of his love we can have no doubt, for he has proved his love in the sacrificial death of his Son in our behalf. After all, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

If you are in Christ, this is who you are. Your identity in Christ—chosen, holy, beloved—is your deepest reality. In light of this great and precious reality, how then shall we live?

OUTWARD REFLECTION (3:12b-14)

In these verses, Paul makes quite clear that our outward behavior should reflect our inward reality. Although it’s subtle in the text, he suggests three mindsets the gospel—our being chosen, holy, and beloved—should create in us, and then pairs each with a specific way we put that mindset into practice. Let’s examine each pair in turn.

First, the gospel creates *compassion* that manifests in *kindness*. Because God has had compassion on us despite our sin, we cannot help but feel compassion toward others even despite their sin. The more aware we are of God’s mercy toward us, the more likely we are to show mercy to someone who sins against us. Every offense against us, no matter how great, pales in comparison to the offense we’ve given our holy and gracious God; and yet, he showed mercy to us, so how could we not show mercy to others? Thus, the gospel creates compassion in us, which we display in our kindness. Though we may be tempted to repay evil with evil or a harsh word with a still harsher word, in light of the gospel, we have what we need to respond kindly instead.

Second, the gospel creates *humility* that manifests in *gentleness*. It is impossible to think highly of yourself if you truly understand the gospel. We are so thoroughly wretched, so totally unable to live as we should, that God himself had to live the life we were supposed to live, and then die the death we deserved to die. The gruesomeness of Christ’s excruciating death reveals how heinous our sin truly is. Needless to say, this should stir a deep humility within us. This humility shows in our gentleness. As Christ humbly and meekly served us, washing our very feet, so we meekly serve others, valuing them above ourselves and looking to their interests instead of our own (see Philippians 2:3-11). When tempted to respond arrogantly in the midst of conflict, we will instead humble ourselves. Considering that the conflict likely stems in part from our own selfish desires, we will meekly put those desires to the side and serve the other in love. A husband, for example, who just wants to plop down on the couch after a dreadful and exhausting day at work, won’t lash out at his nagging wife, but will instead humble himself in Christ, get up, and serve her by doing the dishes, caring for the kids, or whatever is needed.

Third, the gospel creates *patience* that manifests in *forbearing* and *forgiving*. The word for patience suggests long-suffering (as some translations render it). The whole reason we have to talk about conflict resolution is because people can be really annoying, and at times downright hurtful. Patience like this springs from the gospel, as we remember that

¹ *This Momentary Marriage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009): 54. (Emphasis original.) I am indebted to Piper for many of the ideas in the first two sections of this lesson.

God chooses to bear with us, to endure our many lapses, because he has committed himself to us, binding himself to us through the covenant of promise. To be patient with—to suffer long—people who will annoy and hurt us, we must choose to be forbearing and forgiving, as Paul commands (verse 13).

These two words are related but different. To forbear suggests endurance. It might not be polite to say it, but that doesn't make it less true: when we form relationships with people, not least in the covenant of marriage, we are choosing to *endure* them—warts and all. Forbearance is an honest acknowledgment that people will annoy and hurt us, but that we will choose to stick by them still. This is exactly what we acknowledge in our marriage vows: we will endure in health *and* sickness, for richer *and* poorer, for better *and* worse.

To forgive, on the other hand, suggests treating others better than they deserve. (The word Paul uses here for “forgive” has the word “grace” at its root.) When someone wrongs us, we thirst for justice. We want vengeance, to repay them for what they did to us. We want to meet a passive-aggressive complaint with a passive-aggressive retort. However, in light of God's forgiving us—and positively blessing us in Christ—we choose instead to forgive. Not only do we refuse revenge, we positively bless the other—meeting a passive-aggressive complaint, for example, with a kind word of affirmation (see 1 Peter 3:9).

We could, of course, sum up this whole section with the simple command *love*, which is exactly what Paul does (verse 14). Because God loves us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 3:12). To love is to treat another person as God has treated you in Christ: with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness.

SPECIFIC RESPONSE (3:15-17)

In the second paragraph, Paul offers four specific ways we must respond to conflict in light of the gospel. Remembering who we are in Christ and having clothed ourselves with Christ-like love, what exactly should we do to handle or even prevent conflict?

First, we must let Christ's peace arbitrate our disputes (verse 15). The word “rule” stems from the word for arbitrator or umpire (as in athletic contests). When conflict springs up, especially among the family of God (which is the context Paul is discussing here), we must let the peace of Christ regulate our response. Christ died to create the unity of the one body (Ephesians 2:14-18), and he calls us to maintain that peace. F.F. Bruce describes what this looks like practically:

Christians, having been reconciled to God, enjoying peace with him through Christ, should naturally live at peace with one another. Strife inevitably results when men and women are out of touch with him who is the one source of true peace; but there is no reason why those who have received the peace which Christ established by his death on the cross should have any other than peaceful relations among themselves.²

Christ's peace functions, then, like a referee calling fouls on the playing field. If we respond selfishly in the flesh, seeking to advance our own evil desires at the expense of others, the Spirit blows his whistle, so to speak, and invites us to consider how we should live in light of the gospel.

² *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984): 157.

Second, we must practice ongoing gratitude. Thanksgiving runs like a thread throughout this paragraph, showing up in each verse. The implication is clear: gratitude to God for his surpassing goodness to us in creation and redemption should color our every response. Indeed, one of the primary failures of unbelievers is that they fail to thank God for what he has given them (Romans 1:21). When we remember who God is and what he has done for us, pausing to give him thanks, we will quickly find many of our conflicts petty and shameful. Consider the contrast between what God has given you and what you deserve, and you will soon find your selfish desires withering at the root (and remember from last week, our conflict stems from those selfish desires!). If a husband and wife fighting about how to budget their money were to pause and together thank God for his gracious provision in their life, it might not resolve the dispute, but it would certainly change the atmosphere in which the rest of the conversation happens.

Third, we must rehearse gospel truths in community (verse 16). In many ways, this verse is a purpose statement for Journey Groups as a whole. From the very beginning, we seek to let the message of Christ—the gospel—dwell richly in us as individuals and among us as a community. Given our focus here, however, let's consider why we need other Christians to teach and admonish us, even in our shared liturgy (including the music we sing), in order to handle and prevent conflict.

In *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, Paul David Tripp lays out four reasons we need the ministry of others—including loving rebuke—in our lives:³

1. **The deceitfulness of sin.** We all have blind spots when it comes to sin, which is why Scripture repeatedly admonishes us not to deceive ourselves (e.g., Jeremiah 17:9; 1 Corinthians 3:18; James 1:22). Examining ourselves in light of the Word is a good first step, but even then, we will need others to confront us honestly with what the Word says about the parts we can't (or won't) see.
2. **Wrong and unbiblical thinking.** None of us thinks entirely biblically. "We hold distorted, self-aggrandizing or self-excusing perspectives on God, others, and ourselves."⁴
3. **Emotional thinking.** Especially in the middle of conflict, we will struggle to reason clearly and biblically, instead letting our heightened emotions direct our thoughts and responses.
4. **Our views (of God, self, others, etc.) tend to be shaped by experiences.** We trust ourselves more fully than we should because we think we have interpreted our experiences accurately. We need others to correct distorted interpretations of our circumstances, especially during conflict.

Most people, when experiencing conflict, will leave a heated conversation and immediately replay it in their heads. Assuming you do that too, let me ask you: have you ever lost an argument in your head? Of course not. We all assume we are correct, which is why we're arguing in the first place. But as soon as you invite someone else into the conversation, they will undoubtedly point to at least a few places where you just may be wrong—especially if they're examining the conflict in light of God's Word. That's why we need the ministry of the Word *in community* so desperately.

Finally, we must remember whose name we bear (verse 17). This verse is all-encompassing, covering every aspect of our lives, but has clear relevance for interpersonal conflict. We fight our battles in our own names for the most part,

³ *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002): 212.

⁴ Ibid.

pursuing selfish means to selfish ends. But we are no longer our own; we have been purchased by the very blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:20). We now bear the name of Christ, and all that we do must be done for his glory and honor (1 Corinthians 10:31). If we approach conflict with the glory of Christ as our chief end, we will no doubt choose to respond differently than if we had our own selfish desires as our chief end. Let your every word and every deed seek to glorify him, and see how differently your quarrels go!

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Jeremiah 17:9-10
- ☐ James 1:22-25
- ☐ Ephesians 4:1-6
- ☐ Matthew 5:21-24

DOING THE WORD

Knowing who we are in Christ should alter our every thought and action. This doesn't happen automatically, however, but only when we do the hard work of applying gospel truths to our lives. Answer the questions below to help apply the gospel to the area of conflict resolution.

How does understanding God's love for you influence the way you treat others? (Note: The question asks how it *does* influence your behavior, not how it *should*.)

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What habits or repeated thoughts, words, and deeds show that you have not let the gospel fully shape the way you resolve conflict? What commitments would you like to make in response?

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Replay an argument or quarrel you had recently, as we often do when walking away from a fight. However, instead of working to win the argument, seek instead to *lose* it. Jot down your reflections as you try to dissect where you were selfish, unkind, impatient, and the like.

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When have you needed an outside perspective in order to see sin in your life? What steps can you take to ensure you're open to, and even positively seeking, that sort of loving rebuke?

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION

LESSON THREE THE PRACTICE

HEARING THE WORD

In the last lesson of this study, we'll get intensely practical. Now that we've seen the root problem (our own selfish desires), and where we get the power to overcome it (the gospel), we can turn to the practice of conflict resolution.

When you're experiencing conflict with someone, what should you do? In a densely packed passage, Paul lays out several specific, concrete actions to pursue.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ²⁶ "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold. ²⁸ Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

EPHESIANS 4:25-32

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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While not every verse in this passage directly relates to conflict, much of it does. What does Paul teach here that would be especially helpful for someone in the middle of a quarrel? How would it help?

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What does a gospel response look like when we encounter conflict? In a series of exhortations, Paul lays out the concrete actions of gospel-shaped conflict resolution. Just prior to this week's passage, Paul commands his readers to "put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires," and instead to "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:22-23).¹ This is the same metaphor he used in the passage we studied in the last lesson, when he urged us to put on love. Thus, in these two paragraphs, Paul encourages ten specific practices for those who want to clothe themselves with gospel love.

PRACTICE #1: BE HONEST (4:25)

We must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to one another, especially in conflict. When fighting, we will often mislead or shade the truth in order to gain the upper hand. Indeed, we may even lie in order to avoid conflict, although this will be a superficial solution, considering the actual issue remains unresolved. A husband might dishonestly say he's already called the repairman, when in fact he completely forgot to do it earlier. Since Eden, humans have tried deception as a means to avoid blame and shame. Nevertheless, we can see how devastating this would be to a relationship, as it destroys a foundation of trust. In addition, you won't make any progress if you're hiding what you really did, what you really think, or how you really feel. The gospel frees us from shame and the need to hide, because the cross exposes us for the sinners we are, but God welcomes us with open, loving arms just the same.

PRACTICE #2: BE CAREFUL (4:26a)

Our emotions function like a Check Engine light on a car dashboard: they alert us to a problem. When you feel angry, that's your clue to deal with the issue. Nevertheless, we must be very careful *how* we deal with it, especially if we're still feeling angry. Unchecked anger can find expression in any number of sins, including several that we'll deal with later in this lesson (like unkind words). James details both the solution and the problem in a key passage on anger:

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

JAMES 1:19-20

¹ For more on the put off/put on approach to biblical change, see Yellow Year, Unit 6, Lesson 6.

Rather than venting your spleen immediately, slow down. Seek to listen and understand first. Getting the other person's perspective will almost always strip away most of the anger—and in any case, it will give your brain time to cool down! At the same time, being slow to speak and get angry does *not* mean we should be slow to address the problem.

PRACTICE #3: ACT QUICKLY (4:26b)

Paul encourages us to deal with our sin before the sun goes down. That means our usual practice should be to deal with the issue the same day it arises. We don't want anger to fester, as that will often lead to bitterness and resentment. Still, there may be situations where it is wiser to wait before we act. We may need to take some time to calm down, understand the situation more fully, or seek counsel. Or it may be too late in the day (the sun is already down!), with tiredness creeping in, to have the sort of conversation the situation requires. Act as quickly as wisdom dictates, but do be sure to deal with your anger biblically.

PRACTICE #4: ATTACK SATAN (4:27)

Attack sin and Satan, and not each other. Especially if you're in conflict with a fellow believer, you're not really on opposite sides. You have a common enemy—your sin—that threatens the unity of the body. You're fighting side-by-side (not against each other) against a very real spiritual threat. Satan takes great delight in broken relationships (especially broken marriages), and seeks to keep wounds open and emotions running high. If your conflict is with another believer, pause and pray that God would give you victory over Satan. Simply reminding each other that you're on the same team in an epic struggle will help you resolve the conflict in a more Christ-like manner.

PRACTICE #5: SERVE OTHERS (4:28)

Certainly this is the verse that has the least to do with conflict resolution, but the underlying principle is deeply relevant. Theft of any sort causes conflict. If you've ever been pickpocketed, you know how infuriating it is. But we needn't limit this to stealing material objects: what about someone who steals credit or limelight or a place in line? Clearly those who are in Christ must put off stealing like this. But what do we put on instead? It is not enough to stop stealing; we must commit to providing for others as well. We make it our aim to better the lives of those around us. Consider what would happen to a marriage, for example, where instead of nagging, hurtful comments—which steal joy, respect, and affection—a spouse seeks to provide tireless affirmation and encouragement. Such a commitment could change the health of any marriage, friendship, or even work relationship.

PRACTICE #6: SPEAK GRACEFULLY (4:29)

This one almost feels too obvious to mention, but it is also where most conflict begins. As Christians, we must put off unwholesome speech, Paul says. Given what we're to do instead, we can assume this includes any and all speech that tears down rather than builds up. Elsewhere Paul tells us to avoid obscenity, foolish talk, and coarse joking (Ephesians 5:4); malice, slander, and filthy language (Colossians 3:8). We can't overstate how important this is to our spiritual life. As Jesus reminds us, "But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty [careless] word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36). In the midst of conflict, we are more than apt to speak carelessly, and can easily wound even those we care about. "The words of the reckless," after all, "pierce like swords" (Proverbs 12:18). Not only that, but careless words will inevitably worsen the conflict. As another proverb reminds us, "a harsh word stirs up anger" (15:1).

But there is another way. Indeed, Proverbs 15:1 starts on a more promising note: “A gentle answer turns away wrath.” Having put off careless and unwholesome talk, then, we instead put on grace-filled speech. What does this look like? First, every word we speak—yes, *every single one* (after all, Paul says, “Do not let *any* . . . but *only* . . .”)—must build up our hearers. If what we’re about to say won’t edify others, we should keep our mouths shut. Second, our words must be according to the need. Different occasions call for different sorts of words: blessing, rebuke, admonition, sympathy, counsel. In conflict, we’re likely to assume the other person needs rebuke, but that might not be the case. Frankly, this verse should also remind us that we don’t need to speak as often as we do. We should only speak when there is a need. After all, “Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues” (Proverbs 10:19). Third, our words must give grace to our listeners, which is a more literal translation of the phrase “that it may benefit those who listen.” We should only speak words that will have a beneficial effect, imparting God’s grace to our audience—even if we’re fighting with the audience!

To sum up, then, we want to ask three questions before we speak, especially when in the midst of a quarrel where the temptation to use sinful words is strong: (1) Is it edifying? (2) Is it necessary? (3) Is it helpful? (We might add a fourth in light of Practice #1: Is it true?) Set that guard over your mouth, and you’ll soon find your conflicts proceeding very differently.

PRACTICE #7: BE FILLED (4:30)

The previous six practices all sound great, and I’m sure many of us want to act that way—but we don’t always, do we? In this verse, Paul reminds us that we can’t do it on our own. We need the Spirit to ignite the gospel fuel in our lives. God gave us his Spirit as a seal until the day when we will finally be made fully Christ-like. We live in light of that day, making every effort to work out our salvation in fear and trembling. But we make that effort not in our own strength, but with the strength God supplies through his Spirit. You cannot white-knuckle your sinful tendencies into submission; you must be filled with the Spirit instead.

PRACTICE #8: RID YOURSELF (4:31)

In many ways, this is simply a summary of the behaviors and attitudes Paul has already encouraged us to “put off.” As followers of Christ, we cannot give into bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, or malice. We must deal with our anger biblically; speak only what is edifying, necessary, beneficial, and true; and seek to forgive and bear patiently with the other (which is where Paul takes us next). While this may be summary and restatement, it will prove invaluable for us during conflict, as we must make a conscious, Spirit-empowered decision *not* to respond in the flesh. Instead, we will choose to rid ourselves of these ungodly behaviors and attitudes, and to respond in a Christ-like manner.

PRACTICE #9: BE KIND (4:32a)

We looked at kindness and compassion last week, so we don’t need to spend too much time here. This is the balance to Practice #8: having rid ourselves of ungodly behaviors and attitudes, casting them off like tattered and stained clothing, we put on kindness and compassion instead. This can feel exceedingly challenging in the midst of conflict because, in that moment, you will not think the other person *deserves* kindness or compassion. But, of course, that is precisely the point: neither did you deserve the kindness God showed you in Christ, and yet he chose to treat you kindly still. Can you not do the same for someone who has wronged you? That’s where Paul heads in the second half of this verse.

PRACTICE #10: FORGIVE OTHERS (4:32b)

We forgive others, even those who have wronged us truly and grievously, because God forgave us in Christ. His forgiveness is to be the model of our own, as we saw last week. Because we covered some key aspects of forgiveness then, let's consider a more challenging question this week. Must we always forgive? What if the person who wronged us expresses no repentance or contrition? What then?

There are three key points to make in answering this series of questions:

1. **Because God forgave us in Christ, we can and must forgive those who wrong us.** Jesus makes this point forcefully in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:23-35). In view of the overwhelming debt God has forgiven you, how can you exact repayment for comparatively miniscule offenses? To do so would be to despise God's forgiveness in Christ. However, when we reflect deeply on God's forgiveness, we find our hard hearts softened toward our offender, making forgiveness possible.
2. **Thus, before God we must examine ourselves routinely to see if we have truly forgiven others in our hearts.** In Mark 11:25, Jesus says, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." Notice that there are no qualifications here. Do you hold something against anyone? Then you must let it go now, or else you'll cut yourself off from God's forgiveness. (To be clear, our forgiving others does not *earn* God's forgiveness; rather, unforgiveness shows that we have not truly understood or received God's forgiveness, because if we had, we would now have forgiving hearts ourselves.) We might refer to this as unconditional *inward* forgiveness, which Christians offer without qualification before God.
3. **At the same time, we might not express that forgiveness to an unrepentant individual.** After all, we are to forgive as God forgives us in Christ, and he does not forgive apart from repentance, though he stands ever ready to forgive any who come in humble contrition. We express forgiveness (without denying or downplaying sin) in order to experience reconciliation, but there cannot be reconciliation without an honest admission of wrongdoing. An abusive spouse or parent, for example, who will not acknowledge sin or the pain she has caused, cannot expect reconciliation and a "restored" relationship until she confesses and repents of sin. At that time, though, we would be ready to express forgiveness in light of the work we've done before God in prayer. We might refer to this as conditional *outward* forgiveness, which Christians offer to a repentant individual.

Because we are sinners still, and the presence of sin lingers in our divided hearts, we will keep hurting even those we love until God perfects us in glory. This is why we must "put on" forgiveness, clothing ourselves with the same forbearing love God has for us, in all our interactions with others. We do not quit on relationships when we sin or are sinned against, especially in a covenant relationship like marriage. We do all we can to effect reconciliation and restoration, forgiving and loving just as God has forgiven and loved us in Christ.

Of course, as we pursue reconciliation, we'll often discover that we need to not only forgive but *be forgiven* as well. When we recognize the ways we've sinned against someone, we confess to God and apologize to the offended person. A godly apology includes not just saying the words, "I'm sorry," but expressing sorrow at having hurt the other person, accepting responsibility for what you've done (instead of shifting blame), expressing genuine repentance (i.e., a commitment to change by God's grace), and suggesting ways you can make it up to the other person.

When seeking to resolve conflict, let's encourage one another to pause and reflect on this passage, praying for God's strength to live out these gospel practices for his glory and the good of the relationship.

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Matthew 18:23-35
- ☐ Luke 17:1-4
- ☐ Colossians 4:2-6
- ☐ Proverbs 10:19, 12:18 & 15:1

DOING THE WORD

Because this lesson was so intensely practical, we want to ensure we're actually putting these ideas into practice. Take some time to work through this passage in light of the questions below.

With which practice(s) do you struggle most? Why do you think that is?

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Do you struggle with offering unconditional forgiveness in your heart to those who have wronged you? Why or why not?

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How do you express forgiveness typically? Do you have difficulty expressing it? Do you downplay or deny the offense to make the other person feel better, or magnify it to make them feel worse? After forgiving someone, are you able to treat them as if they had not wronged you?

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What work do you need God to do in your heart to put off your old self and put on the new when it comes to gospel-shaped reconciliation? Jot down a prayer asking him to do just that.

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Are you experiencing any ongoing conflict right now? If so, what steps will you take to resolve it biblically in light of what you learned in this unit?

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